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SUBJECT: GEORGIA BI-WEEKLY UPDATE MAY 2

¶1. This cable contains current items of political, economic, and social interest concerning Georgia during the weeks of April 19-May 2.

Two New Ministers, One New Deputy for Reintegration

¶2. Even before voters go to the polls, the May 21 parliamentary elections are affecting the composition of the Georgian government as some officials resign to run for Parliament while outgoing MPs move into the government. On May 1, Prime Minister Gurgenidze appointed Bakur Kvezereli the new Minister of Agriculture and Irakli Gvaladze the new Minister of Environment. Prior to their appointments, both were deputy ministers in the same ministries they have now been appointed to lead. The previous ministers had resigned to run for majoritarian seats in Parliament. MP Elene Tevdoradze, who chairs the Human Rights Committee in the outgoing Parliament, will be appointed a Deputy State Minister for Reintegration after her MP mandate expires. She will focus on human rights and will take lead responsibility for a new element of the State Ministry - minorities. Tevdoradze has been an MP since 1999 but was not included on the ruling National movement's list for the upcoming election. Tevdoradze is respected by the public thanks to her well-known advocacy of prisoners' rights, although she has also sometimes been a subject of some ridicule due to her poor Georgian. The position of Foreign Minister remains unfilled following David Bakradze's resignation to head the National Movement's list.

Governor of Imereti Resigns for Second Time

¶3. Akaki Bobokhidze, governor of the Imereti region (which includes Kutaisi, Georgia's second-largest city) has resigned to run for a majoritarian seat in Parliament. Bobokhidze replaced the previously announced candidate of the ruling National Movement for this seat, Gogita Gegelashvili. Gegelashvili had been nominated by Speaker Nino Burjanadze, and following Burjanadze's unexpected withdrawal from the parliamentary race, Gegelashvili also withdrew his candidacy. Bobokhidze has been replaced as governor by Mikheil Chogovadze, Chief Prosecutor of Imereti. This is the second time Bobokhidze has resigned from the influential governor's position. The first time was after a 2005 incident in which Bobokhidze beat journalist Irakli Imnaishvili, breaking his nose, following a political talk-show on local television.

Russia Resumes Mail Links with Georgia

¶4. According to an April 21 announcement from the Georgian Ministry of Economic Development, Russia resumed direct postal communication with Georgia on that day. Russia had severed postal links in early October 2006 during a spat over arrested Russian spies in Georgia. The Ministry said it had received an official letter from the Russian Postal Service (no word how it was delivered) giving notice that both mail service and postal money transfers would be resumed. However, because there are still no legal land transit points between Georgia and Russia, air mail is the only postal service available. These are the latest in a series of Russian steps to roll back the October 2006 sanctions. On March 25 the two countries resumed the direct air service and on March 28 they resumed maritime traffic.

TEFFT